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Russian oil is not so scarce

The Central Intelligence Agency has conceded that its controversial 1977 estimate of falling Soviet oil production overstated the Russians' oil problems. The CIA had forecast that Russian oil output would peak by 1980, maybe as early as 1978, at the present level of 12 million barrels a day and fall to 8 or 10 million by 1985, with a need to import as much as 3.5 million barrels a day.

The prediction was not, of course, a theoretical exercise. It has been a factor in the U.S. foreign policy decision to be prepared to mount a military presence in the Mideast if necessary to forestall a Soviet takeover, through Iran or Afghanistan, of Persian Gulf oil resources.

Now the CIA admits that it underestimated Russia's ability or willingness to seek and find new oil in Siberia to maintain its production level. It is now predicated

that the Soviets will still be turning out 10 to 11 million barrels a day by 1985.

There are two ways of looking at this assessment of Russian petroleum capability. One might be disappointment that our world rival now figures to be strong in energy independence for a longer time than anticipated. The other, however, is relief that the Soviets will not be out prowling around any sooner looking for oil elsewhere. At best they would become a competitor for the oil stocks available for import. At worst their need for liquid fuel could impel them to seize Mideast oil fields. Considering the consequences of such a move, it's probably just as well if—while not exactly congratulating the Russians on their improved oil outlook—we accept the development as a welcome postponement of a potentially acute future U.S. problem.